

Chapter 28
Arguing from Miracles that God Exists

According to the argument of the previous chapter, neither God's intentions nor even His existence can properly be discerned in nature. We can have no good reason to think that whatever order or beauty or goodness we find in the world, that order, beauty, or goodness speaks to the existence of any supernatural being, let alone a supremely intelligent, all powerful, and perfectly good supernatural being.

If God's existence and intentions are not discernable in the workings of nature, though, perhaps sometimes He reveals them to us directly. Perhaps God makes Himself known to us at specific times and places through particular acts of His will. Perhaps, now and then, God presents Himself or announces His intentions to us or to those of us He favours. Indeed, many people have claimed to have encountered God directly—at least as a presence in their lives, if not also incarnate or otherwise present to their senses. And many people have claimed that some occurrence they witnessed informs us of God's goodness or of His plans or hopes for us.

The feeling that God is here with one gives rise to arguments from religious experience that God exists. The religious experience to which these arguments appeal is an experience as though God were present to one. The idea behind arguments that God exists based on the feeling of God being present is that only if God exists would one have had such an experience. Now it is important to these arguments that the experience one takes to be that of the presence of God is not a natural phenomenon. It cannot be that one's having that experience could be explained without positing that God exists. If one's having that experience can be explained on the basis of godless psychology or physiology alone (as the experiences we call illusions can be explained), then the experience is just another natural phenomenon and, so, no more speaks to the existence of God than does the rhythm of the tides or the fitness of the eagle's eye for hunting. In order for an argument from religious experience to constitute good reason for believing that God exists, we must have reason for thinking that that experience was not the product of natural forces. We must, that is, if we are going to argue that our religious experience gives us reason to believe that God exists, have good reason to think that one's having felt the presence of God was miraculous.

God's presence to one is only one sort of miracle to which one might appeal in arguing that God exists—or, at least, in arguing that one is not unreasonable in believing that He exists. For an argument from a miracle to go any distance toward establishing that religious belief can be reasonable belief, though, one would need reason to believe that the event one thinks is a miracle really did happen miraculously. Could one ever reasonably believe of some event that that event happened miraculously?

Before answering this question we need to describe more fully what a miracle is.

1. The concept of a miracle

First of all, a miracle is an event that occurs contrary to regularities in nature or natural laws. A miracle, that is, does not occur as a lawful effect of some prior natural event. As such, an event that happens miraculously cannot be explained by citing a law of nature.

A miracle, because it occurs contrary to regularities in nature or natural laws, violates the course of nature. The event that is the miracle must lack one or another property that it would have had had it been an entirely lawful result of prior events. As such, a miracle, no matter how small, marks a break with the past. Each miracle sets the world on a new course.

A miracle cannot be explained by citing a law of nature. Does that mean that it cannot be explained at all, that it occurred inexplicably? Maybe not. To say of an event that it cannot be explained by reference to any natural law isn't immediately to say that it was entirely uncaused and, thus, that it cannot be explained at all. Though it lacked a natural cause, it might have had a supernatural cause. To explain it, then, one would have to cite its supernatural cause.

Miracles have no natural cause and, thus, for any miracle that does have a cause, its cause must be supernatural. Any miracle that has a cause, then, one might suppose, expresses the attitudes or intentions of a supernatural being. A correct interpretation of a miracle brought about by a supernatural being would reveal to us the attitudes or intentions of that supernatural being.

On the other hand, unless the principle of sufficient reason is true, any miracle might simply be an uncaused event (an event caused neither by something within nature nor by something outside of nature). (Or, at least, a miracle would be an event some of whose properties are not as they are in virtue of properties of previous events.) Of course, the miracles of interest to a religious believer are those brought about by God. As such, so far as we understand a miracle correctly, we understand something about God's values or emotions, or God's plans or purposes.

One might right away object that miracles, violations of natural regularities, simply do not occur. They do not occur because they cannot occur. Everything that happens is covered by some natural law (though perhaps an indeterministic one). Nothing could happen that would not be covered by some natural law. Since a miracle is an event that possesses some of its properties illegally under nature's law books, there can be no miracles.

It is not easy to see how this objection could be made to stick. The problem with the objection is that the concept of an event occurring in violation of natural law is not internally inconsistent. There seems to be no reason to think miracles impossible. For our part, then, we will accept that an event could occur miraculously. We will accept the possibility of miracles at least for the sake of argument, given that we know no reason to think them impossible.

We accept that miracles are possible and, thereby, that perhaps some events in the history of the world have occurred miraculously. One who would argue from the occurrence of a miracle to the existence of God is under no obligation to demonstrate that miracles are possible. What such a one needs to show, then, is that it is reasonable to think of some specific event that that event happened miraculously. Moreover, in showing that it is reasonable to think some event a miracle, she does not have to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that that event occurred in violation of natural regularities or laws. She needs only to show that it is reasonable given the evidence at hand to believe that it did.

One who would argue from the occurrence of a miracle to the existence of God would need also to show that it is reasonable to believe that the miracle was not uncaused but occurred directly by the hand of God. She might here defend the principle of sufficient reason. She

would also, it seems, have to interpret the miracle—that is, she would have to say something about what the miracle means, what it indicates about God’s attitudes or projects—and to defend her interpretation of it.

The task of arguing from miracles to the existence of God is not an easy one! We have identified three separate endeavours within the task. A person arguing from miracles to the conclusion that one can, without offending reason, believe that God exists must: 1) explain why it does not offend reason to believe of some particular event that it occurred miraculously; 2) give reason for thinking that that miracle was not uncaused but brought about through a supernatural cause; 3) give reason for thinking that that supernatural cause was an act of will stemming from a being that might well have been God.

In any case, that argument goes nowhere if it doesn’t succeed at stage 1), at explaining why it does not offend reason to suppose of some particular event that that event occurred miraculously. In what follows, we will consider an argument purporting to show that arguments from miracles inevitably fail right at the very first stage. According to this argument, it is always unreasonable to believe of an event that it lacks a natural cause or violates a natural law. Whatever evidence one might have of an event that it lacked a natural cause, that evidence can never be sufficient in quality to warrant the belief (even a tentative, provisional, undogmatic belief) that that event was a miracle. Thus, anyone who believes of an event that it was a miracle believes that that event was a miracle against his own standards of reasonable belief. He or she believes unreasonably.

2. *A best-case scenario*

Imagine the following:

- A light on a wall has flashed on and off every second for an hour, then it remains on for a full second, then it resumes flashing on and off every second.
- The light’s flashing is regulated by the most accurate and dependable switch in existence and the whole machine is powered by the most dependable battery in existence.
- The current from the battery passes through an excellent surge protector before reaching the light bulb.
- Engineers who disassemble and examine the light, the wires, the switch, the surge protector, and the battery can find nothing that would account for the light’s remaining on a full second. From what they observe about the machine, the light should not have remained on a full second but continued to flash on and off as it had been doing and then resumed doing.
- You have been trained in the art of careful observation, you were paying close attention to the flashing light, and you saw the light remain on for a full second and then resume flashing. A video-tape recording of the light supports your testimony.
- You are one of the crack engineers who attempted to find something that would account for the light’s remaining on. You are satisfied that your investigation into the anomaly was thorough.
- You were the one who set up the video camera the tape from which bears out your observation that once and only once the light remained on for a full second. You examined the tape and the camera and found nothing that would suggest that the tape somehow failed to record accurately what happened.

Given all this, if *anyone* has ever been reasonable in believing that a miracle occurred, *you* are reasonable in believing that a miracle occurred! Yet, according to the argument we are about to consider, you would not be reasonable to believe that indeed a miracle occurred.

Your evidence that the light's staying on for a full second was miraculous is that you and your colleagues, who are as well positioned and well qualified as any people could possibly be to note and investigate such a happening, investigated that happening as fully as you could and found nothing in either the machine or its environment that would account for it. You all agree that the light did stay on for a full second and you have excellent evidence that it did. But your attempt to explain why it stayed on for a full second has failed. And so, you think, perhaps it occurred without a natural cause. You may, in these circumstances, reasonably *entertain* the hypothesis that nothing in nature caused the light to stay on for a full second; but you may not reasonably *believe* that hypothesis, at least according to the argument we will develop.

To begin this argument, note that it is possible that despite your best efforts, you simply missed something in the machine or its circumstances that would account for the light's remaining on. Had you noticed this something, whatever it is, you and your colleagues would have had an explanation of the anomaly which proceeds entirely in terms of natural causes. Also note that it is possible that the anomaly had a natural cause but that in the time before you examined the machine, brief though it was, all evidence of that cause degraded into nothing. Finally note that it is even possible that natural forces not comprehended in the science of your day were at work. You can't explain the anomaly, working, as you must, with current science, but someone with a better understanding of nature could explain it.

It's possible you missed something, it's possible that no trace of what caused the anomaly remains to be found, it's possible that everything is there but you lack the proper theory of nature needed to explain it. But it is also possible that the anomaly was a miracle. Which, then, is most likely: that the light did not stay on miraculously, though you are unable to explain why it stayed on; or, the light stayed on miraculously? You shouldn't believe that the light stayed on as a result of some natural cause you know not what unless that is what's most likely true; you shouldn't believe that the light stayed on miraculously unless that is what's most likely true.

In this situation, someone might insist, it is not unreasonable to think that the light stayed on miraculously, for the hypothesis that it stayed on miraculously is better supported by the evidence than is the hypothesis that there was a natural cause we know not what. After all, such a person would say, you are an excellent engineer and you searched thoroughly for a natural cause; had there been a natural cause, most likely you would have discovered it.

Indeed, we can all agree, it would be dogmatic to insist that there must have been a natural cause. So what is the argument that even in the situation we've described, it would be unreasonable to think that the light stayed on miraculously?

3. *The two sources of explanatory belief*

What the argument we are developing needs to show is that we could never have evidence enough to warrant our believing that some particular event occurred miraculously. We allow that it is possible of an event that it occurred miraculously. We even allow that there could, in some case, be more evidence that an event occurred miraculously than that it occurred in

conformity with natural causes. And yet, however good is the evidence that an event occurred miraculously, it is not good enough to support the belief that it occurred miraculously.

We drew a best case scenario for supposing that a miracle occurred; if we can explain why even in that case we lack warrant for believing that what occurred was a miracle, then, since the same sort of considerations will apply in all other cases, we can see why we could never have evidence enough to warrant believing that something occurred miraculously.

A belief about the cause of something we have experienced can have one or the other of two sources. 1) It can rest on the innate or acquired habit of associating events of one sort with events of another sort. Simon associates events of type A with events of type B, such that he will expect an event of type B to occur should he witness an event of type A, and such that he will suppose that it is probable an event of type A occurred should he witness an event of type B.

Suppose Simon witnesses an event of type B. He believes that an event of type A could have occurred and that no event of another type sufficient for an event of type B occurred. He forms the belief that an event of type A occurred, and that the event he witnessed occurred because an event of type A occurred. 2) It can rest on a desire that things be some way or on a preference that they be one way rather than some other way. Simon would like that Mary is fond of him. Simon believes it is possible that Mary did what she did out of fondness for him. Simon forms the belief that Mary did what she did out of fondness for him. (Sometimes, as well, explanatory beliefs rest on the fear that it would be too awful for something to have happened in some way.)

Now, an explanatory belief sustained by a habit of association is more likely to be true than is an explanatory belief sustained by a desire or preference or fear. Thus, explanatory beliefs held on habits of association are beliefs held reasonably, while explanatory beliefs held on desires or preferences (or fears) are held unreasonably.

Given this, so our argument goes, you cannot reasonably believe that the light remained on miraculously. Suppose that you do believe that the light remained on miraculously. Your belief is sustained either by some associations you make among events of different types or it is sustained by some affective or conative attitude you have. If it is sustained by your habits of association, it might be reasonable for you to hold it, while if it is sustained by an affective or conative attitude, it is not reasonable for you to hold it. But you could have had no range of experiences such as to produce in you the habit of associating events of one type with no other events or with supernatural events. Thus, your belief that the light remained on miraculously is not sustained (could not be sustained) by a habit of association you have formed in experience. That means that your belief that the light remained on miraculously is sustained (must be sustained) by an affective or conative attitude you have. Therefore, it is not reasonable for you to believe that the light remained on miraculously.

Another way to put the point is this: you have plenty of good experience of events occurring as the result of prior, natural, events. This leads inculcates in you, and supports, the sense you have that natural events have natural causes and, thereby, that the occurrence of an event in the world can be explained by citing another event in the world. On the other hand, you have no experience at all of an event happening all by itself or of a supernatural event causing an event in nature. To believe that an event occurred either without any cause or because of a supernatural cause, you have to ignore all the evidence you have that events you observe have natural causes. The only thing that could make you ignore all that evidence is a wish, a desire, or a hope. If you believe of an event that that event occurred miraculously, it

must be because you want to believe that it occurred miraculously. But to believe something because one wants to believe it is to believe unreasonably. Thus, anyone who believes of an event that it is a miracle believes it is a miracle unreasonably.

4. *You cannot reasonably believe that there was some natural cause of the light's remaining on, either*

Even in the best-case scenario we drew above, you would be unreasonable to believe that the light's remaining on for a full second was a miracle. But you would also be unreasonable to believe that its remaining on could not have been a miracle and must have had a natural cause. After all, you looked hard in all the right places for the cause of the light's remaining on, and you did not find it. And there is nothing incoherent in the idea that the light's remaining on had no cause or no natural cause. Thus, to believe that the light's remaining on had to have had a natural cause is to be dogmatic, for you have no concrete evidence of a natural cause. Therefore, you would be unreasonable to believe with any degree of conviction that the light's remaining on had a natural cause.

The only reasonable thing for you to believe in the situation is that the light's remaining on might have had a natural cause that has so far gone undetected. You must continue to allow that it might have been miraculous. You may continue to search for its natural cause, of course.

Reasonable person that you are, you don't need to believe that it must have had a natural cause in order for you to continue to search. The belief that it might have had a natural cause will be belief enough to sustain you in your endeavour.

What does all this mean for arguments that God exists that draw on religious experience, that draw on one's sense that God is present to one? For such an argument to succeed, we said, the sense that God is present to one must be a miracle. It must lack a natural cause, for if it has a natural cause, then it is just an illusion and shows us nothing about the supernatural. Suppose one has the sense of God being present to one. Suppose also that one has conscientiously investigated whether one is fatigued or on drugs or otherwise likely to be in the grip of an illusion. Suppose through one's investigation one has collected excellent evidence that one is attentive and sober and clear headed. Still, according to the argument we have developed, one would be unreasonable to conclude that indeed God is present to one. One can conclude that indeed God is present to one, the argument goes, only by overcoming the resistance one's habits of association put up against thinking of an event that it has no natural cause, and only by giving in to one's desires or emotions could one do that. Since a belief sustained by a desire or an emotion is a belief held unreasonably, the belief that God is present to one is always a belief held unreasonably. No good argument that God exists can rest on an unreasonable belief, so no argument from religious experience to the existence of God can succeed.

5. *Questions*

i) What about inference to the best explanation? The account of the source and nature of evidence employed in the argument above seems limited and naive. Might it not be reasonable to believe that something occurred miraculously when that belief is sustained by the thought that holding its occurrence to be without (natural) cause would best explain all the facts, including the fact that people well positioned to find a (natural) cause did not find one?

ii) What about observation? Can we not, at least in an ideal case, simply see that nothing that happened prior to some event was the cause of that event?

iii) Is it true that in the first place a miracle is an event in nature that lacks a natural cause? Perhaps the above argument begins from too narrow an account of miracles. Maybe to be a miracle it is only necessary that an event be extremely unlikely in the context, as well as being an important or significant event in a person's life. So maybe surviving a catastrophic fire, for instance, is miraculous, if surviving it was extremely unlikely, even though not impossible given natural laws.

iv) What about the idea that all events in the world have sufficient causes also within the world? If they do, then it is not dogmatic to hold with conviction that the light's remaining on had a natural cause, though we might never know what that cause was. It is not dogmatic, for we have independent reason to believe that it *must* have had a natural cause.

v) Are not habits of association themselves just as much beyond the purview of reason as are desires and emotions? The above argument contrasted belief held on evidence with belief held because of desire or emotion. Its account of evidence had to do with habits of association formed in experience. But if the habits of association we form are themselves conditioned by our affective natures, then all our beliefs rest on what, from the point of view of reason, are arbitrary features of our psychologies.

vi) Why care to be reasonable when being reasonable hurts? Why not believe in miracles when doing so satisfies your desires or warms your heart?